

VZCZCXR07203
OO RUEHIK
DE RUEHLM #1112/01 3380501
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 040501Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0924
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2123
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9157
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7403
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5277
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3555
RUEHNW/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5208
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0076
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0743
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4325
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9718
RUEHB1/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 7009
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0064
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001112

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [FAID](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: IDP UPDATE: SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS WITH CHALLENGES
AHEAD

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Large numbers of returns of internally displaced persons (IDPs) over the past several months and recent advances in freedom of movement policy are very encouraging. The returns process will continue to be complex, however, and long-term reintegration may present new challenges. The U.S. should continue to press the GSL for increased information sharing and coordination with international actors so our partners can provide appropriate support for GSL-led returns initiatives including return movements and demining. The returns package meets basic needs but may require adjustment, particularly longer-term food rations for those who have missed planting seasons. Rehabilitation of ex-combatants, and permission for ICRC to take on a key role in rehabilitation, continues to be a priority. END SUMMARY.

MANIK FARM: REDUCED NUMBERS, INCREASED FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

¶2. (SBU) IDP returns have eased overcrowding in Manik Farm, with the total population dropping from approximately 230,000 in August to approximately 125,000 at the end of November. A USAID fact-finding mission to the North on November 23-25 found that people no longer had to wait in long lines for health services or water collection, nutrition indicators had improved, and flooding had not been a problem as previously forecast. But the departure of those providing services, such as teachers at temporary learning centers, had impacted service delivery. Firewood for cooking was in short supply. IDPs seemed optimistic about the GSL's plan to return everyone by the end of January 2010.

¶3. (SBU) The Government of Sri Lanka's (GSL's) new freedom of movement policy went into effect on December 1. UN sources estimated that 9,000 or more people left Manik Farm that day, despite considerable confusion over implementation and procedures. While news reports on numbers vary widely, the UN reported that approximately 80 percent chose to come back to

the camp that night. Some indicated they did not want to miss out on transportation or returns packages by traveling on their own. According to authorities' explanations to an INGO monitoring Zone 4 that day, there was no limit on how long IDPs could remain outside the camp, they could bring belongings with them, and they could bring items back into the camp with them as long as they were not restricted material (e.g. cell phones). IDPs, however, believed they could leave only for seven days and were confused about bringing materials out of or into the camp. The exit application required signatures from three officials. IDPs were under the impression that application forms had to be photocopied, while authorities said handwritten applications were acceptable. While IDP movement was generally unrestricted once they left the camp, they could not visit other camp zones except through a special pass, as previously required. The Zonal Commander and Area Commander indicated to the INGO that they would clarify the procedures through the camp PA system to avoid further confusion.

RETURNS: EARLY SUCCESS, CHALLENGES AHEAD

¶4. (SBU) There has been significant progress on returns, with approximately 150,000 returns to date, including approximately 23,000 to former LTTE areas. Most returns were to areas best able to support them, however, and many returnees were staying with host families or transit camps rather than in their original homes. The bulk of returnees went home to the districts of Jaffna, the East, southern Mannar and parts of Vavuniya not heavily affected by the conflict. Among those in temporary locations, some could not return home because of security concerns and some were from

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areas in the Vanni not yet open for returns. USAID officials emphasized that IDPs from the interior of the Vanni would face a more difficult reintegration at home than those from other areas. Long under LTTE control, this area now lacks government services such as health and education. It is heavily mined, and in the rush to prepare for returns, much has simply been designated dangerous. An estimated 50-70,000 people, mainly from Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu, will likely remain in Manik Farm for a variety of reasons even after organized returns operations have been completed.

RETURNS PROCESS: IMPROVED COORDINATION NEEDED

¶5. (SBU) There appears to be some lack of coordination between the GSL and the UN in the returns process. Lack of timely information on how many people would return where and when forced the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to scramble to provide appropriate transport, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to supply non-food items rapidly. To better support upcoming returns, the World Food Program (WFP) was establishing hubs in the Vanni (Malawi, Mullaithivu District, and Kilinochchi Town). WFP planned to pre-position food at the hubs for easier access to distribution points at returns destinations.

¶6. (SBU) GSL and INGO demining organizations coordinate their efforts through monthly meetings, but INGOs are not engaged in developing the national demining strategy. INGOs and the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) work in separate areas assigned to them by the GSL and do not have input into, or knowledge of, an overall strategic plan. U.S. INGO partners report pressure to complete their work unrealistically quickly in order to meet GSL returns timelines. INGOs have expressed some concern that SLA demining operations do not adhere to international standards, but have not closely evaluated SLA operations. Two PM/WRA-funded technical experts are now in-country assessing SLA demining capacity prior to a potential U.S. contribution of demining equipment and/or training. Mine risk education (MRE) is also essential, especially where IDPs return to communities where minefields

have only been demarcated and not cleared.

REINTEGRATION UPON RETURN: ASSISTANCE REQUIRED

¶7. (SBU) IDP returns packages may require adjustment to meet actual needs. Returnee families are eligible for a shelter grant of Rs 25,000 (about USD 220) per family, a UNHCR NFI kit, a UNHCR kitchen set, and UNICEF hygiene kit, roofing sheets from the GSL and Government of India (GoI), an agricultural tool set from the GoI, 3 days of cooked meals provided by the GSL and six months of food rations from WFP. In a November 21 press release, the GSL announced that it would increase the shelter grant to Rs 50,000 (about USD 438) as of December 15. But a United Nations source reported that in a meeting with the Presidential Task Force (PTF) earlier this week, the PTF said it had not yet approved -- or seriously considered -- implementing the increase and the public announcement had been made without its concurrence. According to a UN housing expert, repairing a severely damaged home would cost around USD 1,500 to repair, but Rs 50,000 (about USD 438) would be a positive step in addressing immediate needs. It should be noted that the "shelter" grant is actually a cash transfer, so returnees may choose to use it on non-shelter priorities (and early indications are that some returnees are doing so). Food assistance may also require adjustment from earlier expectations. USAID officers noted that many returning IDPs missed the Maha planting season and may miss the subsequent Yala season, and thus

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would have to rely on rations for significantly longer than six months, possibly up to 16 months. The GSL indicated to the UN that all national NGOs could access the North, and INGOs with national partners would also have access to returns areas. This would allow for reintegration programming such as livelihoods, protection and community development.

¶8. (SBU) Both short- and long-term solutions for ex-combatants are keys to Sri Lanka's long term stability. The GSL is holding over 11,000 ex-combatants in 17 closed camps, awaiting individualized legal review of their cases. ICRC does not have access to the camps. USAID staff were permitted to visit some of the camps and noted overcrowding and the need for health services, particularly psychosocial counseling. IOM provides technical assistance to the Ministry of Justice to develop the National Action Plan and Framework to profile and register detainees, with USAID support. Ex-combatants now in rehabilitation programs will require support reintegrating into their communities upon completion of their program in early 2011. The GSL's National Action Plan for the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants into Civilian Life calls for USD 75 million over six years. The U.S. currently supports a portion of this plan through IOM.

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU) As returns increase and camp populations decrease, the U.S. may consider shifting aid from camp-based services to returns and reintegration support. But some support, particularly on protection issues, may still be crucial for the residual population in the camps. The GSL appears to be making a good faith effort to support returns and ease restrictions on IDPs, which is encouraging. We should recognize the progress made so far while also urging the GSL to increase coordination with the international community, permit ICRC's engagement, and follow through on its commitment to allow NGO access to returns communities.
FOWLER